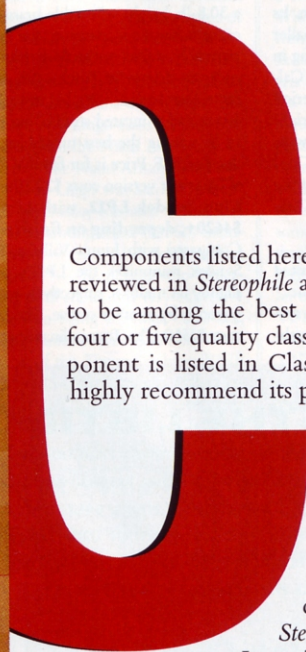


RECOMMENTS RECOMPONENTS

FROM LOUDSPEAKERS
TO HEADPHONES,
500 OUTSTANDING
PRODUCTS THAT WILL
BLOW YOUR MIND



Components listed here have been formally reviewed in *Stereophile* and have been found to be among the best available in each of four or five quality classes. Whether a component is listed in Class A or Class E, we highly recommend its purchase.

Each listing—in alphabetical order within classes—is followed by a brief description of the product's sonic characteristics and a code indicating the *Stereophile* Volume and Issue in which that product's report appeared. Thus the September 2009 issue is indicated as "Vol.32 No.9."

Some products listed have not yet been reported on; these are marked (NR), for "Not Reviewed." We recommend that you read any product's entire review before seriously contemplating a purchase (products without reviews should therefore be treated with more caution)—many salient characteristics, peculiarities, and caveats appear in the reviews, but not here. To obtain back issues of the magazine, visit our website: www.stereophile.com. We regret that we cannot supply photocopies or e-mail copies of individual reviews. All full reviews are reprinted in our website "Archives" Section: these are marked "WWW." More are added each week, so check the on-line listing.

In general, components do not remain listed for more than three years unless at least one of the magazine's writers and editors has had continued experience with them. Discontinuation of a model also precludes its appearance. In addition, though professional components—recorders, amplifiers, monitor speaker systems—can be obtained secondhand and can sometimes offer performance that would otherwise

guarantee inclusion, we do not generally do so. *Stereophile's* "Recommended Components" listing is almost exclusively concerned with products currently available in the US through the usual hi-fi retail outlets.

How editors' recommendations are determined

The ratings given components included in this listing are based entirely on performance—*ie*, accuracy of reproduction—and are biased to an extent by our feeling that things *added* to reproduced sound (*eg*, flutter, distortion, colorations of various kinds) are of more concern to the musically oriented listener than are things *subtracted* from the sound (*eg*, deep bass or extreme treble). On the other hand, components markedly deficient in one or more respects are downrated to the extent that their deficiencies interfere with the full realization of the program material.

We try to include in "Recommended Components" every product that we have found to be truly excellent or that we feel represents good value for money. Bear in mind that many different tastes are represented. The listing is compiled after consultation with *Stereophile's* reviewing staff and editors, and takes into account continued experience of a product after the formal review has been published. In par-

Shopping for products that offer the best balance of sound + value?

Seeking a new or updated audio system?

Look no further as *Stereophile* editors reveal the industry's best audio gear.

ticular, we take account of unreliability and defects that show up after extended auditioning. The fact that a product received a favorable review cannot therefore be regarded as a guarantee that it will continue to appear in this listing.

The prices indicated are those current at the time the listing was compiled (January 2010). We cannot guarantee that any of these prices will be the same by the time this issue of *Stereophile* appears in print.

There is a near-universal consensus that at some point in the upward climb of component prices, severely diminishing returns (performance versus price) set in. However, there is no agreement as to the exact price level at which that takes place. Where we *have* found a product to perform much better than might be expected from its price, we have drawn attention to it with a \$\$\$ next to its listing. We also indicate, with a ☆, products that have been on this list in one incarnation or another since the "Recommended Components" listing in Vol.30 No.4 (April 2007). Longevity in a hi-fi component is rare enough that we think it worth noting (although it can also indicate that the attention of design engineers has moved elsewhere).

We are not sympathetic toward letters complaining that the Symphonic Bombast A-123 that we recommended heartily two years ago no longer makes it into "Recommended Components." Where deletions are made, we endeavor to give reasons (there are always reasons). But remember: *Deletion of a component from this list does not invalidate a buying decision you have made.*

Individual reviewers mentioned by their initials are: John Atkinson, Jim Austin, Paul Bolin, Lonnie Brownell, Martin Colloms, Brian Damkroger, Robert Deutsch, Art Dudley, Michael Fremer, Larry Greenhill, Jon Iverson, Fred Kaplan, Erick Lichte, John Marks, Paul Messenger, Thomas J. Norton, Wes Phillips, Bob J. Reina, Kalman Rubinson, Markus Sauer, Jonathan Scull (J-10), Chip Stern, and Sam Tellig.

TURNTABLES

A
SME 20/12: \$28,000

"Among the best-built turntables in the world," the SME 20/12 is a tank-like machine weighing more than 75 lbs. It has an oversized 14.3-lb platter, and a 17.6-lb aluminum-alloy subchassis secured by ten O-rings for each of four suspension towers and will take 12" arms. Its three-phase, eight-pole motor uses an electronic controller to achieve precise speeds of 33.3, 45, and 78rpm. Though it lacked the bottom-end weight and macrodynamic range of even more

expensive turntables, and had a slightly dry, analytical sound, the SME offered a very low noise floor and stable image specificity, said MF. (Vol.32 No.5 WWW)

TO NEARMS

A
SME 312S: \$3995

The 312S is a 12" tonearm with a tapered armtube made of pressure die-cast magnesium for strength, rigidity, and low mass. With fit'n'finish to match the no-nonsense precision of SME's 20/12 turntable, the 312S includes a secure sliding-track overhang-adjustment mechanism, a spring-loaded VTA post, and a silicone-filled damping trough with adjustable paddle. SME has produced "a tonearm that has all of the 12" arm's theoretical advantages and none of its disadvantages," MF said. (Vol.32 No.5 WWW)

PHONO CARTRIDGES

A
Koetsu Coralstone Platinum Mono: \$15,000

The outrageously expensive Coralstone Platinum Mono has a platinum magnet system, silver-plated copper wiring, and a proprietary stylus shape. It combined "sensational" image specificity and three-dimensionality, even in mono, with "an uncanny physicality and weight" across the entire frequency spectrum. MF: "There's no excuse for the price, except the sound. So get over it." (Vol.32 No.5)

Koetsu Urushi Vermillion: \$4700

The red-lacquered Urushi Vermillion uses a low-

capacitance cantilever and a Quadrahedron stylus. Its samarium-cobalt magnet and silver-clad six-nines copper coils produce an output of 0.4mV. Though it was "slightly polite on top" and lacked some air and space, its "rich and colorful" sound was never soggy or too romantic. The "artfully voiced" Vermillion proved to be "one of a handful of the most musically engaging cartridges" in MF's experience. (Urushi, Vol.21 No.10; Vol.24 No.10; Urushi Vermillion, Vol.31 No.1 WWW)

Sumiko Reference Palo Santos Presentation: \$3500

The Palo Santos Presentation moving-coil cartridge has an open-construction body of tuned wood; a boron cantilever, a suspension of synthetic rubber, and an ultra-low-mass Vital PH diamond stylus. Compared to the Benz-Micro LP S, the Palo Santos Presentation sounded "brasher," with a shallower soundstage, leaner midbass, and sharper transients. "Its overall sound—smooth, sweet, but still sunny, and nicely detailed—makes it a great choice for the music lover with eclectic tastes who wants to bridge the gap between analytical and romantic sound," said MF. (Vol.32 No.12)

PHONO PREAMPS/ MOVING-COIL STEP-UP DEVICES

A
Nagra VPS: \$5995

Nagra's Valve Phono Stage is a single-ended, hybrid moving-magnet/moving-coil phono preamp with

HOW TO USE THE LISTING

The classes each cover a wide range of performance. Carefully read our descriptions here, the original reviews, and (heaven forbid) reviews in other magazines to put together a short list of components to choose from. Evaluate your room, your source material and front-end(s), your speakers, and your tastes. With luck, you may come up with a selection to audition at your favorite dealer(s). "Recommended Components" will not tell you what to buy any more than Consumer Reports would presume to tell you whom to marry!

CLASS A

Best attainable sound for a component of its kind, almost without practical considerations; "the least musical compromise." A Class A system is one for which you don't have to make a leap of faith to believe that you're hearing the real thing. With Super Audio CD, 24/96 DAD, and DVD-Audio now available, we have created a new Class, A+, for the best performance in those digital categories. Class A now represents the best that can be obtained from the conventional 16/44.1 CD medium. We also created Class A+ categories for turntables and phono preamps, to recognize the achievements of the Continuum Caliburn and Boulder 2008, respectively.

CLASS B

The next best thing to the very best sound reproduction; Class B components generally cost less than those in Class A, but most Class B components are still quite expensive.

CLASS C

Somewhat lower-fi sound, but far more musically natural than average home-component high fidelity; products in this class are of high quality but still affordable.

CLASS D

Satisfying musical sound, but these components are either of significantly lower fidelity than the best available, or exhibit major compromises in performance—limited dynamic range, for example. Bear in mind that appearance in Class D still means that we recommend this product—it's possible to put together a musically satisfying system exclusively from Class D components.

CLASS K

"Keep your eye on this product." Class K is for components that we have not reviewed (or have not finished testing), but that we have reason to believe may be excellent performers. We are not actually recommending these components, only suggesting you give them a listen. Though the report has yet to be published in certain cases, the reviewer and editor sometimes feel confident enough that the reviewer's opinion is sufficiently well formed to include what otherwise would be an entry in one of the other classes, marked (NR).

a separate power supply. Rigorously selected and matched dual-triode tubes are subjected to 48 hours of burn-in, and are claimed to last for at least 5000 hours. The VPS displayed a warm, rich sound with a "slightly recessed" upper-mid/lower-treble region and "a bit of a midbass boost," said MF, who concluded that its "overall balance . . . makes it among the most captivating and enticing phono preamps I've heard." JA determined that the VPS would work better with MC cartridges of medium to low output than with MM types. The Nagra's optional VFS isolation stand worked to solidify images, tighten bass, and increase overall focus. Price includes MC input card; additional input card adds \$1495 (MC) or \$395 (MM). VFS anti-vibration support and three Nagra spikes add \$1495. (Vol.31 No.9 WWW)

Nagra BPS: \$2399

The tiny, lightweight, battery-powered BPS is loosely based on Nagra's more expensive VPS, but uses bipolar transistors instead of tubes. It provides 51dB gain in MM mode and 62dB in MC. With its "upfront transient speed, clarity, and focus," the BPS was "a more neutral, accurate phono preamp than the lush, romantic VPS," said Mikey. Overall, the BPS sacrificed sustain and richness for attack and rhythm. Compared to the Audio Research PH7, the BPS was "lean, fast, tight, and clean," lacking delicacy and harmonic complexity. MF: "If your system needs an injection of excitement, the BPS is guaranteed to do just that." While the BPS sounded good plugged into the AC, it sounded better when powered by its own 9V battery, added FK, who bought the review sample. (Vol.32 Nos.6, 8, & 10 WWW)

Lehmannaudio Black Cube Decade: \$2399

The Black Cube Decade is an MM/MC design with an outboard power supply, rumble filter switch, and selectable gain. It improved on the Vacuum State JLTi PhonoPre's excellent detail retrieval while retaining the Bel Canto e.One Phono3's dynamic thrust. In addition, it matched the Bel Canto's bass dynamics, but added greater subtlety and textural resolution. The Lehmann's overall sound was slightly warm, with overly smooth vocal sibilants, but microdynamics and low-level detail retrieval were superb, said MF. (Vol.31 No.12)

Musical Fidelity V-LPS: \$149 \$\$\$

Each Musical Fidelity V-Series component measures 6.7" long by 3.75" wide by 1.7" high and is powered by a DC wall wart. The little V-LPS offers input impedances of 47k ohms for MM and 100 ohms for MC. Though it lacked some dynamic range and sounded a bit small, the V-LPS was surprisingly good at retrieving detail. "It should work like a charm with real-world -priced 'tables," said ST, adding "much, much better than you have a right to expect at this size and price." Compared to the Audio-Technica AT-PEQ3, the V-LPS offered "better image specificity and dimensionality, greater dynamic slam, more supple instrumental textures, and better harmonics," said MF. (Vol.32 Nos.5 & 12 WWW)

SACD, DVD-A, & CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS & MUSIC SERVERS

Editor's Note: SACD and DVD-A player ratings are based on how they sound with their respective hi-rez media, not CD.

Krell Evolution 505: \$10,000

The massive Evolution 505 SACD player weighs 29 lbs and measures 173" W by 6" H by 173" D. Its aircraft-grade aluminum chassis is available in silver or black, and has rounded edges and slotted sides for a graceful appearance. Like the other components in the Evolution series, the 505 incorporates Krell's propri-

etary CAST current-drive circuitry. FK raved: "Width was wider, depth was deeper, imaging was sharper-but, unlike some gear that excels at all these audiophile virtues, the Krell 505 sacrificed nothing in musicality." Through its balanced outputs, however, the 505 lacked some detail and transient snap. JA noted "excellent measured performance" from its conventional, voltage-mode outputs. (Vol.31 No.9 WWW)

Nagra CDP: \$14,295

The CDP is a compact (12.2" W by 3" H by 10" D) and versatile front-loading player with an outboard 12V DC power supply. In addition to coaxial S/PDIF, AES-EBU, and TosLink digital outputs, it accommodates both balanced XLR and RCA analog connections. Though Nagra feels the single-ended outputs are the better-sounding, WP heard little difference between the two. The CDP's wide, forward soundstage and great dynamic contrasts produced "a tightly focused, phenomenally detailed musical image." Switching the output gain from 3.5V to 1V produced more spatial detail in WP's smaller office system. Compared to the Chord Blu-DAC64 combo, the CDP sacrificed some breath and heft for snap and sparkle. The CDP's ability to cope with data errors and its rejection of jitter were among the best JA has measured. (Vol.30 Nos.5, 7 & 8 WWW)

Primare CD31: \$2495 \$\$\$

An evolution of Primare's D30.2, the CD31 uses a DVS DSL-710A "ultra-silent" transport, adds optical and AES/EBU digital outputs to the TosLink S/PDIF, and replaces the D30.2's Fixed Power switch with a Power switch in the AC cord receptacle. With a "slightly warm" tonal balance and a perspective that favored "subtle nuance" over "hi-fi hyper-reality," the CD31 imparted a "natural, vinyl-like feel" to a variety of recordings. "The CD31 isn't perfect—but it's sublime," said BD. JA was similarly impressed by its state-of-the-art "Red Book" CD performance. (Vol.30 No.7 WWW)

DIGITAL PROCESSORS

Musical Fidelity V-DAC: \$299 \$\$\$

Each Musical Fidelity V-series component measures 6.7" long by 3.75" wide by 1.7" high and is powered by a DC wall wart. (The rating with the wallwart is Class D; it moves into Class C with Musical Fidelity's auxiliary power supply.) The V-DAC uses a single Burr-Brown DSD1792 chip and an SRC4392 upsampler, and offers coaxial, optical, and USB inputs. It sounded "extraordinarily quiet," with a silky-smooth midrange and sweetly extended treble, said ST. However, the Cambridge Audio DacMagic provided more low-level detail and had a fuller, richer bottom end, albeit at a higher price. Despite its bare-bones construction, the V-DAC exhibited "generally superb measured performance," said JA. (Vol.32 Nos.5 & 12 WWW)

TWO-CHANNEL PREAMPLIFIERS

Krell Evolution 202: \$16,500 ☆

Beautifully assembled and jam-packed with technology, the two-chassis Evolution 202 incorporates Krell's Current Audio Signal Transmission (CAST), which involves driving a low-impedance load from a high-impedance source, essentially eliminating the cable's effects on signal transmission. Along with the Evolution 600 monoblocks, the 202 provided a vanishingly low noise floor, immersing WP in performance and performance space. Accordingly, JA's measurements found very wide bandwidth and very low distortion. "A pleasure to measure," he said. WP noted "very subtle" differences between the Evolution 202 and Ayre K-1xe. Though they matched one another in terms of dynamic range and the ability to convey subtle tonal, harmonic, and spatial information, the Ayre may have been just a bit more "euphonic." "I guess I vote for the Krell with my head, which says that one of these

preamps must be *right*," said Wes. CAST interconnects add \$500/m. (Vol.29 No.12, Vol.30 No.6 WWW)

Nagra PL-L: \$9495 ☆

With its inputs on the left and outputs on the right, the PL-L offered KR some setup problems, but he found it "practically impossible to criticize the PL-L's sound. The PL-L was "absolutely satisfying and enjoyable. Noise was never noticeable . . . and all controls worked silently and smoothly . . ." The PL-L was revealing and natural, imparting little personality or coloration of its own." KR commended it "not only for professional monitoring, but also for home systems of the very highest quality," and JA found "superb measured performance . . ." Another Swiss jewel of a product from Nagra." JA found the PL-L to sound "very dynamic" from both its single-ended and balanced outputs, and praised the preamp for its exceptional clarity and masterful reproduction of space. He warned, however, against matching the PL-L with lean-sounding ancillaries. Remote control adds \$1000; balanced outputs add \$600. (Vol.25 No.11, Vol.31 No.6 WWW)

TWO-CHANNEL POWER AMPLIFIERS

Krell Evolution 600 monoblock: \$33,000/pair ☆

"Extraordinary dynamic range within a velvet glove," read our December cover. This 600W powerhouse marries superb fit'n'finish to extremely advanced thinking that includes Krell's Current Audio Signal Transmission (CAST) and Active Cascode Topology (ACT). Combining "low-level detail, sinuous pacing, and sheer power," the 600s reproduced music in a way that was "scary real," said WP. CAST interconnects add \$500/m. (Vol.29 No.12, Vol.30 Nos.3 & 4 WWW)

Musical Fidelity Titan: \$30,000

The fully balanced, dual-mono, two-chassis Titan is rated to deliver 1kWpc into 8 ohms. Though only slightly more than 7" high, each box is 19" wide and more than 2' deep. The 150-lb power supply houses two 3kV toroidal mains transformers and a pair of toroidal chokes, while the 100-lb amplifier section contains 40 output devices. Regardless of volume level or source material, "the Titan produced luxurious, velvety, enveloping warmth, along with precise imaging, a huge, stable soundstage, and a nimble rhythmic drive," said MF. Compared to the Bryston 7B SST², the Titan offered far superior image focus, richer instrumental textures, and a greater sense of space, said MF. JA, too, was impressed: "Technically, this is an extraordinary amplifier." Production is limited to 40 units. (Vol.32 No.6, Vol.33 No.1 WWW)

Q (Tube)

Quad II Classic monoblock: \$3100/pair \$\$\$ ☆

With the new 15W Classic, Quad didn't set out to improve on or update the original Quad II, but to remanufacture it the way it had originally been made 50 years before. The circuit remains unchanged, and details of its construction have been modified only where mandated by law or in cases where certain types of parts are extinct. Exhibiting timbral beauty, spatial honesty, and deep emotional involvement, the II Classic had AD feeling nostalgia: "There isn't a sweeter amplifier on earth. . . . It's beautiful, it's true to the original, and it has more than a little soul." Its lack of speed and focus in the bass region made it less than optimal with rock music but perfect for small-scale classical. While JA also found it "difficult to resist nostalgia," he was pleased to note that, "Despite its design vintage, the Quad II Classic offered quite respectable measured performance." Loads below 8 ohms are to be avoided. (Vol.28 No.8 WWW)

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

A

Krell FBI: \$18,000

The 300Wpc Fully Balanced Integrated combines Krell's FPB-300cx power amp with their KCT line stage in one beefy, 104 lb aluminum chassis. It uses separate circuits and toroidal transformers for the preamp and amp sections, which are united by Krell's CAST technology. The FBI shared the 300cx's "tight deep bass, thunderous dynamics, and snappy transients," but added "greater detail, even delicacy, in the timbres and textures of instruments," said FK. JA was absolutely pleased: "Quiet, powerful, stable, and well-behaved even into low impedances, it is a paradigm of what an integrated amplifier needs to do." The CAST inputs get the best sound quality from the FBI, concluded Fred. (Vol.30 No.7 WYW)

Musical Fidelity AMS35i: \$8999

The class-A, dual-mono AMS35i is rated to deliver 35Wpc into 8, 4, or 2 ohms. Large and heavy and with dangerously sharp heatsinks, the AMS35i has one pair of balanced line-level XLR inputs, four pairs of fixed-level RCA tape outputs, and, for biamping or adding a subwoofer, a pair of variable preamp outputs; there is no phono stage or phono option and no head-phone amp. Though it lacked some bass control, the AMS35i had a "rich, full-bodied, sweet, harmonically pure" sound that worked to ameliorate the less than perfect, especially digital recordings or remasterings, said ST, but points out that the MP's owner is paying a premium for the overbuilt design. (Vol.33 No.3)

Unison Research Preludio, all not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.

B

Primare Systems DVD110: \$2495

The "drop-dead gorgeous" DVD110 boasts an elegant chassis of brushed stainless steel with top-mounted function buttons. It combines a DVD/CD player with an AM/FM tuner and 75Wpc integrated amplifier, and offers five sets of video outputs, three line-level analog audio outputs, three sets of analog audio inputs, an iPod connector, optical and S/PDIF digital outputs, and RS-232 and IR remote control jacks. Compared to the Carat I57, the Primare "was ever so slightly lighter in texture and more agile in articulation," said JM. "The DVD110 is a great DVD receiver at a very reasonable price," though he notes that a slight coolness just keeps it from Class A. (Vol.32 No.2 WYW)

LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS

Editor's Note: Class A "Loudspeakers" are sufficiently idiosyncratic and differ enough from one another that prospective customers should read *Stereophile's* original reviews in their entirety for descriptions of the sounds. I have therefore just listed every system or combination that at least one of *Stereophile's* reviewers feels, as a result of his or her experience, approaches the current state of the art in loudspeaker design. (Note that, to be eligible for inclusion in Class A, the system must be full-range—ie feature bass extension to 20Hz. It must also be capable of reaching realistic sound-pressure levels without any feeling of strain.)

For those unconcerned about the last fewertz of low-bass extension, we have created "Classes A, B, and C (Restricted Extreme LF)" for those speakers that are state of the art in every other way. Candidates for inclusion in this class must still reach down to at least 40Hz, below the lowest notes of the four-string double-bass and bass guitar.

In addition, such has been the recent progress in loudspeaker design at a more affordable level that we have an extra class: E, for "Entry Level." Someone once asked us why *Stereophile* bothers to review inexpensive loudspeakers at all: In effect, aren't we insulting our readership by recommending that they buy inexpensive models? Remember: It's possible to put together a musically satisfying, truly high-end system around any of our Class D and E recommendations.

That's why they're listed—and why you should consider buying them.

A—Full-Range

Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX Series 3: \$68,000/pair
(Vol.32 No.9 WYW)

YG Acoustics Anat Reference II Professional: \$107,000/pair, as reviewed
(Vol.32 No.3 WYW)

A—Restricted Extreme LF

Magico V3: \$27,000/pair

The Magico V3 is a three-way, sealed-box speaker with twin 7" woofers, a 6" midrange unit, and ScanSpeak's top-of-the-line 1" ring-radiator Revelator tweeter. The speaker's front and rear baffles are CNC-machined from 1"-thick aluminum, while the side and top panels are formed from hollowed-out, rectangular sheets of 1"-thick plywood, rotated so that their edges face outward to give the speaker an attractive striped appearance. While the Magico will never be a speaker for low-bass addicts, once optimally set-up in JA's room, its combination of bass weight and low-frequency extension was "addictive," while its detailed and natural highs were "beyond reproach." Though its overall presentation was "somewhat on the polite side," it combined the soundstaging capabilities of a good minimonitor with exceptional retrieval of low-level detail, enthused JA. LG agrees, feeling that the V3s produced some of the best sound he heard at the 2008 CES. The Magico was "fussy" about amplification and room placement, however. (Vol.31 No.5 WYW)

Quad ESL-989: \$8900/pair ☆

The electrostatic ESL-989 adds two bass panels to the '988, which is the current version of the classic ESL-63, and is said to have higher power handling. Nonetheless, LG found that music that exceeded peaks of 94dB triggered the speaker's protection circuit. Still, the ESL-989s shook LG's listening room with "lots of satisfying bass," and added outstanding midrange response, top-notch imaging, wall-to-wall soundstaging, smoothness, focus, low distortion, and low listening fatigue." While the speaker rolls off sharply below 30Hz or so, during his listening sessions, LG couldn't think of another loudspeaker he'd rather own. By contrast, PM couldn't get the '989's mid-bass integrated at all in his solid-walled UK room, preferring the smaller ESL-988 (as does ST). Typical US dry-wall construction will probably better match the speaker's bass tuning, therefore. AD added that "The '989 played music with as much tunefulness, drama, and scale as I've ever asked for or heard from other speakers . . . And not only was its bass extension perfectly satisfying, but, with the exception of the speed of bass fundamentals . . . the bass quality of the Quad '989 was astoundingly good." Unlike LG, AD never heard a hint of strain or distress, even when playing the Quads at extremely loud volumes (though it is fair to point out that his room is smaller). JA was impressed by how well the '989 handled the midrange and by its "superbly stable" imaging, but found problems with positioning the speakers to get the low-bass/upper-bass transition optimized. Price depends on finish. *Stereophile's* 2003 "Product of the Year" and "Loudspeaker of the Year." (Vol.25 No.11, Vol.26 No.5 WYW)

Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss: \$15,000/pair (stands included)

Exquisitely constructed and beautifully finished in Piano Black or Sapele, The Kiss is a three-way loudspeaker with an integral stand and two separate enclosures, complete with micrometer adjustment of both vertical and horizontal axes. A 1" center-vented silk-dome tweeter coincident with a 7" proprietary Flat-Spider-Cone midrange is mounted in the top enclosure, while a 9" proprietary Spider-Cone woofer resides below. With its seamless presentation, astonishing physicality, and well-extended bottom end, The Kiss was "exquisitely capable of revealing the emotional core" of music, said WP. While there was "much to admire" in the speaker's measured behavior, JA was bothered by a

peak in the low treble. (Vol.33 No.2 WYW)

Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia 2: \$16,700/pair

JA said about the original Sophia that this three-way, floorstanding, reflex-loaded loudspeaker had a way of "reproducing the wide dynamic sweep of a symphony orchestra in full measure" that left him captivated. The wide dynamic range was complemented by extended lows; high frequencies were "delicate," the midrange was "neutral," and the bass region "laid bare every little inflection." JA had only one minor criticism: The speaker's tonal balance was slightly forward in the mid-treble, leading to a soundstage that was not as deep as he might have liked. The midbass might also be a bit excessive in some rooms, he warned. PB echoed JA's enthusiastic recommendation, noting "exhilarating bass performance" with a "giant, wraparound soundstage" and "freakish dynamic range." The Mk.2 updates of the earlier Sophia include a reengineered tweeter, Wilson's new M3 cabinet material, a reworking of the crossovers, and a new diffraction-absorbing pad configuration. "Better than the original in nearly every way," said BD. The Sophia 2 offered larger dynamic transients, clearer and more detailed bass, an airier soundstage, and a slightly more laid-back sound. "Not quite the scale, dynamics, or bottom end of the MAXX 2, but definitely Class A," he sums up. Despite his initial skepticism, Art was impressed by what he heard: "The Sophias were open and clean without robbing the music's flesh and blood, and were detailed without sounding bright." (Vol.25 No.7, Vol.28 No.10, Mk.1; Vol.29 No.11, Vol.33 No.2, Mk.2 WYW)

HEADPHONES & HEADPHONE ACCESSORIES

B

Musical Fidelity V-CAN: \$199 \$\$\$

Each Musical Fidelity V-series component measures 6.7" long by 3.75" wide by 1.7" high and is powered by a DC wall wart. The V-CAN headphone amplifier provides a standard 1/4" headphone jack along with a 1/8" mini jack, and has a rated output impedance of 5 ohms. Its "silken midrange and soft treble" proved the perfect complements to the analytical sound of ST's AKG 701 headphones. Though it was "a little lightweight" in comparison to Musical Fidelity's X-CAN, the V-CAN was nonetheless clean, clear, and fast. "This may be all the headphone amp you need," sez ST, adding that he likes it with the Audio-Technica ATH-AD700. (Vol.32 No.5)

STANDS, SPIKES, FEET, & RACKS

Finite-Elemente Pagode HD03 equipment rack: \$6825 ☆

This stylish, well-built, four-shelf audio equipment rack with integral vibration damping uses high-strength aluminum uprights, shelves and supports of Canadian maple, and stainless-steel hardware. Placing components atop the HD03 resulted in "slightly but consistently improved" focus, resolution, and dynamic precision. Installing a set of Finite-Elemente's Cera feet beneath a component, however, resulted in "huge, jaw-dropping" improvements in the same areas of sonic performance. Adding a set of Cerabases (\$795/4) to the HD03 increased overall performance throughout. Cera component feet: Ceraball, \$135/4; Cerapuc, \$450/4. (Vol.29 No.2 WYW)

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS

Subwoofers

Headphones & Headphone Accessories

Complete Audio Systems